

Interview Transcript of Marc Rutledge and VADM Raquel Bono

Rutledge: What kind of future do you see for the DHA as its director?

Bono: I think the future for the DHA is really unlimited because, for one thing, the whole concept of the DHA creates a lot of opportunity, not only for the Military Health System, but for the people that work here and who have helped build it. We have a talented cadre of professionals in broad areas that encompass supporting the Military Health Systems and where we need to go for the healthcare delivery for our patients.

The opportunities and the need is really unlimited because healthcare, in and of itself, is evolving. It's not just something that the Military Health System has to keep pace, but this is a national health effort that's actually going on. I've always believed that the Military Health System could help inform and shape the national healthcare effort. That's why I think the opportunity and the potential we have is great, it's enormous. And if we do this right, if we harness everybody's collective talents on this, then we can synergize and align our efforts with other thought leaders within the MHS, then I think we can influence the national healthcare effort, as well.

Rutledge: What do you feel will be your biggest personal challenge as Director of DHA?

Bono: Fitting in my workouts on a daily basis. I mean, that's really important to me and I think that part of it is we ought to walk the talk. That's one part. We're advocating for healthier living, we're advocating for preventive health and preventive medicine, and part of that is being able to allocate the right amount of time for taking care of all the domains of a person's life--your spiritual, your mental, your intellectual, your physical.

And so, that's part of it, being able to fit that in. But I personally feel, too, that that's where it gives me space to kind of think and recharge.

Aside from fitting in my daily workouts, I think one of the major challenges that I'm expecting, coming on as the director, is really being able to understand where all of our talent exists, and being able to bring that out. I know it's in there, I know that we've got it, but it's how do we express that and how do we make available to a greater audience?

Rutledge: What is your number one priority as head of the DHA and how do you plan on meeting that priority?

Bono: Our best opportunity for success is if we can fully optimize what we have here internally in the Defense Health Agency. If we can really align ourselves, synchronize our efforts, and be more transparent across our own organization, so that we can all understand where we are all going collectively, then we position ourselves to be much more effective in supporting the other military health services—Navy Medicine, Army Medicine, and Air Force Medicine. We also position ourselves to be much more effective to be that supporting element to the combatant commanders as a combat support agency.

But it all starts with our internal workings and our foundation of where we are, where our capabilities are, and how we bring that best talent out.

Rutledge: What has been the impact of your family's legacy of military service and naval service?

Bono: This is all I've ever known. I've only grown up with understanding that it's all about service to others. You can tell it means a lot.

This is our adopted country and we would not be where we are, my family or myself, were it not for the opportunities that we've had here. So, I grew up with that whole thought that you needed to serve something larger than yourself, you needed to give back, you needed to make sure that what gave mattered. That's been my whole upbringing and that's been the legacy of my family, and that's the legacy that I hope to leave my children.

By extension, the DHA is now my family, so people have got to be prepared that that's going to be the expectation that I'm going to have for everybody else. We have the opportunity to create a legacy that is timeless, that is meaningful, and that is very impactful. And so, I was us to be very thoughtful about who we're serving and why we're serving, and how much larger this mission is than the day-to-day job. That's something I feel very strongly about.

The work we do, if we are not giving value back to the people we're serving—our patients, or country—then we need to reevaluate what it is we are putting our time into and make sure that we're directing it the right way.

Rutledge: You say that you like to work out and, from a personal standpoint, what inspired you to become interested in being physically fit?

Bono: I've always been physically fit. That's also part of the legacy of my family is that we were all required, well, not required, but we were all encouraged growing up that it wasn't enough just to be academically successful. We had to be able to demonstrate that we were well-rounded, and being well-rounded meant not only doing well academically, but then also choosing a sport and becoming competent about it and competitive in that. And then it also included being able to round ourselves out with service in the community, developing our religious and faith-based activities, and then being able to be a contributing member of the family and being able to support the construct in our family unit.

We've always been very much attuned to that, so when I was growing up, the sports that I played were tennis and swimming, so I swam competitively in high school and college. When I was in college and I shifted to studying pre-med and really working hard to get into medical school, I realized that I couldn't stay on the swim team with the kind of rigor of the work that I had, so I shifted into cross-country running and ran all through the rest of college and then through medical school. I ran and competed in 10ks and half-marathons through medical school and into my residency.

Having some kind of physical fitness or some kind of physical outlet has always been very important to me. It's not something that I acquired late, it's been something that's been part of my life all along.

Rutledge: What advice would you give the young officers and enlisted men and women starting their first assignment as doctors, nurses, corpsmen, and medics in the military health system?

Bono: First off, I'd congratulate them. Not everyone can go into the health field. You have to want to do that from the beginning, and then you have to have some innate talent to assimilate the large amount of information that you need to in order to be very good at healthcare delivery and healthcare support.

I'd congratulate people if they've chosen that and they've mastered that information and knowledge needed to be healthcare providers or healthcare extenders. I think that's an important piece, just acknowledging that right off the bat they've already distinguished themselves.

I think the second part, though, about being those individuals, it's important for them to know how much value they can give to people. I think the piece that we see over and over again, which is why you see that movement to more preventive health-type of efforts, is that we realize that health isn't a given. It's something that needs to be nurtured and sustained. The more we have people who are trained and able and capable of teaching others that, the more value we give to our beneficiaries and to society at large.

I think it's a gift if you've decided to go into the healthcare field in any capacity. I think anybody here at the DHA is already contributing to that gift of health. That is a gift in and of itself.

It's recognizing the importance of that gift and being able to prioritize it in such a way that we're continually reaffirming that for the people that we serve.

Rutledge: Who were some of your influences or people who inspired you? And who does that for you today? Someone when you were younger or as a professional?

Bono: I think everybody grows up with a lot of different heroes and it kind of changes as you go through life. The hero for me is my dad. Right from the beginning.

There's a story I like to tell people, and this is totally true, but it tells a story about how my dad influenced me.

My father is also a surgeon and, as the oldest child, I got to wait up for him at night at night when he was coming home late from the hospital. He and I would have dinner together and one night he came home and I told him that, "Dad, some day I'm going to grow up and I'm going to be a nurse so I can spend more time in the hospital with you." And he says, "Well, why don't you want to be a doctor?" And I said, "Well, I didn't know that girls could be doctors." And that's when he said, "You could be whatever you choose."

I grew up with that and he has always believed that. That's what I believe for everybody else. Once you make the choice, there aren't any things that should get in the way. It's making that first decision to be that.

He has continued to influence that in me every day, and my family, of course, has always been very supportive. For me, I can always count on my family. So, whenever I need that space or that time, I turn to my family.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like to add that you would like to make sure we add to the piece, ma'am?

Bono: What I'd really like people to understand about me is that I really, really am very grateful for the people that are here already. My goal is to make sure that everybody is extremely successful. My job is to make everybody successful, and to that end, what I need them to do is I need them to challenge ourselves, challenge our conventional thinking. I want people to lean very far forward, and I will not let anybody fail if they are leaning far forward.

If we don't get that right answer the first time, that's okay. We can just take that and just learn from that, but I will give people as much maneuver space as they need in order to do things that are very creative and innovative and really stretch our envelope.

But in order for us to do that, I'm going to ask people to be courageous, and I'm going to give them as much top-cover. Like I said, I won't let anybody fail, but I do need everybody to do their very best.